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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2012

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SUBJECT: GOZ REACTS TO CATHOLIC BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER

REF: A. A) HARARE 284

[1](#)B. B) 2006 HARARE 783

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) After several weeks of silence, the GOZ, through newspaper interviews with President Robert Mugabe and Minister of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development Ignatius Chombo, slammed the pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference disseminated and read at the beginning of April. In a conversation with poleconchief on May 17, Archbishop Robert Ndlovu said the letter entitled "God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed" had raised important issues that would need to be considered in next year's election. Ndlovu said the Church was open to dialogue with the government, but he thought this unlikely given election year politics. The bishops will meet in June to consider the government's reaction and next steps. End Summary.

Letter Widely Disseminated

[1](#)2. (SBU) The pastoral letter (Ref A) blamed a small black elite for perpetuating colonial-like misrule and for the assault, beating and torture of unarmed demonstrators. Referring to a crisis of governance, it called for the repeal of repressive legislation and a new constitution. According to Ndlovu, the letter was read from pulpits throughout the country. Numerous copies were distributed to Catholics and

non-Catholics alike throughout the country.

¶3. (C) Ndlovu told us the letter was well-received in urban areas but the reaction to it was mixed in rural areas. He believed this was because of the omnipresence of ZANU-PF and limited access of people to other than the government controlled media in these areas. He also noted that government security forces had impounded copies of the letter to prevent more extensive dissemination.

GOZ Slams Letter

¶4. (U) Almost a month later, in an interview with the GOZ-controlled Herald, Mugabe termed the letter "political nonsense" and accused the Bishops of embarking on a "dangerous path." He said he would talk to some of the bishops about the substance of the letter, but specifically excluded outspoken Bulawayo Archbishop Pius Ncube. However, GOZ minister Chombo several days later raised the level of rhetoric, calling the letter "hateful, unfair, inaccurate, too general, malicious, insidious and, to some extent, diabolic."

¶5. (C) Ndlovu said the bishops' public address of truth to power had clearly struck a nerve with the government. He thought that the delayed government reaction was due to surprise. The letter had taken them unawares. He argued that in fact it was the government that had politicized the letter by their harsh response and by conflating the Church with the political opposition.

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Bishops Open to Dialogue

¶6. (C) Referring to Mugabe's statement that he would discuss the letter with "some" of the bishops, Ndlovu said the Bishops, Conference would be glad to meet with him, but would insist on the presence of all bishops, including Ncube. To date, they had not heard from the president.

¶7. (C) The Catholic Bishops, Conference was a signatory, along with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, to the "National Vision" document, endorsed by Mugabe in October, which called for national dialogue (Ref B). Ndlovu told us he and the bishops had not abandoned the idea of a nation-wide dialogue that included the government, but he believed the focus in the upcoming months would be on the 2008 election rather than dialogue. Nevertheless, he believed the issues set out in the pastoral letter would be raised by candidates in the election.

¶8. (C) Ndlovu concluded that the bishops would meet at the beginning of June to consider the GOZ's reaction to the letter and next steps. Despite the government's caustic reaction, he believed the bishops were united in their desire to continue to raise the points set out in the letter.

Comment

¶9. (C) As we noted Ref A, the pastoral letter contains some of the most forthright African criticism ever of Mugabe and his regime. The regime's harsh response would appear to be a signal that, despite its religious authority, Mugabe is prepared to strike back at further Church efforts critical of him and his government. Churches remain the one national institution in Zimbabwe that Mugabe and ZANU-PF have not been able to co-opt. They are thus regarded (not incorrectly) by the regime as a potentially very dangerous foe. Hence the

strength of the regime backlash.
DELL